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ABSTRACT

This paper comments on program and policy issues concerning school-age day care. The issues discussed are as follows: (1) what kind of day care provision do school-age children prefer? (2) what constitutes a high quality day care program? and (3) how can parents, the general public, and politicians be persuaded to support and finance day care programs? It is emphasized that school-age day care is economically feasible and that it is pro-family in that it supports rather than substitutes for the family. Pleas for extensive research on school-age day care and for high quality and universally accessible day care provision are made. (Author/MP)

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Putting It Together: Some Program and Policy Issues in School-Age Day Care

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This has been an enormously stimulating conference for me. For the first time, people involved in school-age day care have come together from all over the country to compare notes. As different speakers and panelists have shared their experiences a number of common theories have emerged. At this point, I would like to share some of the impressions I have gained.

Docia Zavitkovsky's empathetic description of school-age children and their needs brought to my mind the first time I tried to think seriously about school-age day care. I was at my typewriter at home writing something, and I wanted to throw in a few paragraphs about the school-age day care of the future. I had never thought much about day care for this age group, and I felt uncertain what to write. Then I remembered that I had under my roof at that very moment three excellent consultants between the ages of seven and eleven. At once I sought them out, and asked their advice.

At first, of course, they told me there was no need for school-age day care. School-age children take care of themselves. "I know that," I told them, "but I'm here. While you're taking care of yourself, I like to be here. Parents feel someone should be around in case you need help, or in case of emergency." They agreed that that was reasonable, and they spent a few moments pondering the ideal arrangement.

This was their first suggestion. If, as I suggested, all the parents were working and there were no adults in any of the houses, then the parents should find someone and pay that person to be the adult at home for the neighborhood. It should be a person who really enjoys being with kids. When the school bus comes home, that person should be at the corner to meet the bus and to see that all the kids are on it. If any kid goes somewhere else, the kid should let that person know, either by telephoning before leaving school, or by sending a note home with another kid in the neighborhood. After all the kids get off the bus, they should decide among themselves which house to go to. The person hired by the parent would have keys to all of the homes, and would go with the kids to the house they chose that day.

I asked them, "Why not always go to the same house?" and got a scornful response. That would be boring; it wouldn't be any fun. What

they liked in life was deciding whose house to go to. Sometimes you wanted to shoot a few baskets at the Jones house, with its basketball hoop on the garage door. Sometimes you wanted to look at Ginny's paper doll collection. This particular idea did limit your choices; everybody would have to go to the same house. But the idea of going to the same house every day was totally rejected by my three consultants, and vehemently.

Trying to get them to look at it in another way, I suggested, "What if you didn't get on the bus at all? What if there were some place at or near the school where all the kids could go after school when nobody was home at their houses?" At first they didn't like that idea nearly as much as a person with keys to everybody's house, but they were willing to consider the idea. The first thing they agreed on was this: "It better be good, or we just wouldn't go there." They were not especially worried about bad after-school day care, because they had utter confidence in their own powers to reject it. Their comments reminded me of this age group's ability to "vote with their feet," by simply not participating in what they don't accept.

My interest further stimulated, I asked what a school-age day care program would have to be like to meet their criterion that it "better be good." These are some of the responses I got.

"It lets you do what you want to do, not what some adult wants you to do."

"You could have your club meetings there," (this from the nine year old) "and nobody would barge in and spy on you, and nobody could tell you who had to be in the club."

"If you didn't want to go there, it would be okay to go to your friend's house. You could bring your friend here sometimes."

"If you had something important to do, you would just let them know."

"What's important?" I interrupted.

"Things like band practice, sports, a part in the school play, a job, anything like that."

"You should meet interesting people there," the eleven year old said. Questioned, he explained that although his mother doesn't work away from home her life is interesting because she invites a lot of people to their house -- people who are interesting to meet. People from Russia or Africa, people who have interesting jobs, people who have interesting ideas. He went on, "If the parents are all working, they are going to be busy, and meeting interesting people at work. The kids will need another way of meeting interesting people."

All three were very clear that "it shouldn't be like school." If it turned out to be like school, they all agreed, they just wouldn't go there. Much body language accompanied this comment: head shaking, foot stamp-

ing, fist making. What does it mean to be "like school," I asked. There are "subjects," I was told, and the adults control what the kids can do. My consultants were not anti-school, but they did not want more of the same. My own son summed up his feelings about school this way, "At school they always want you to do your best work. But some of the time I like to do my worst work."

Here at our conference, I was very impressed by Charles Jarm's feeling of responsibility to the children in day care, because this out-of-school time is, as he put it, "their time." I wish we could consider the in-school time "their time" and feel the same obligation to spend it well there too, but our culture has clearly claimed that time away from the kids. My three advisors were in tune with Jarm. They were willing to grant the schools that time (even though, as another son of mine frequently said, "it breaks up your whole day"), but they wanted to protect their autonomy in the remaining small part of the day.

We do not know a lot about school-age day care. The government has studied both center care for three to five year olds and family day care, and infant care has been reasonably well studied. However, apart from a few national studies of what parents are doing about child care while they work, overall very little is generally known about provisions for school-agers. Family Circle magazine found that a lot of seven year olds are left alone at home, even though few parents believe this age group should be left by themselves.[1]

I am involved in a federally funded study of how parents find child care. The study, known as "Project Connections," is conducted by the American Institutes for Research. As we talk with information and referral services across the country, we are getting the same story everywhere: infant care and school-age day care are in very short supply. Recently we went out and interviewed three parents in order to test our questionnaire before starting a parent survey nationally. Of the three parents we happened upon, one was leaving a six year old home alone.

One strong impression I have gained from this conference is that school-age day care is important enough to warrant much more study. I am also finding that more is known, locally, than I had thought. For example, the school system in Arlington, Virginia, has had an extended day program for a long time. In Arlington 14.2% of all the school children use the after-school program. I need figures like that. Arlington knows who uses the program, how many of what income level, how many from two-parent and one-parent families. We need to collect much more of that kind of information. We need to know who and how many will use school-age day care. The pioneering programs described at this conference have provided information of this sort, but we need much more of it, and we need it on a national scale.

From several speakers I picked up the idea that because school-age day care is only beginning to be developed, we have the advantage or being able to "start right." "Starting right" has a number of important aspects, in particular ensuring the school-age child care service is both universally accessible and of high quality. I think "starting right" with

universal accessibility is particularly important because it is very hard to broaden a program which has already begun with a narrow scope.

I think we can and should insist from the beginning that school-age day care is for all children, regardless of income or social class. Some parents can be asked to pay the full costs of day care, but no parent should be excluded. School-age day care could be a positive force on societal attitudes toward other day care programs, by extending the acceptability of the idea of universally accessible care.

At present, public understanding of what is meant by good quality day care is limited. Judith Rosen told us most people think of it as custodial. These attitudes are evident in existing practices within the school-age day care field. For example, most day-care staff are not professionally trained. I know that when I teach school-age day care administrators, their ideas reflect an amazing array of program emphases. We need extensive and standardized in-service training in school-age day care, and we need it now. But as yet, we do not have an adequate research base, to tell us what the content of that training should be.

Some years ago, I was angered and depressed by a New York Times feature story. It seems that a neighborhood had been given an excellent playground director by the city Recreation Department. Never before had the children in the neighborhood been more stimulated and excited by a playground program. The children were engaged in constructive activities -- clearing new areas and cleaning up trash. They were full of interest in the new things they were learning from their "own" adult, Joey the Clown. Joey's career ladder into this school-age playground program had been (1) a sailor in the Merchant Marines, (2) a clown in the circus, and (3) New York City playground director. Parents and children were happy with the role Joey played in their community. However, the city suddenly decided to terminate Joey as a city employee because he did not have academic training in recreation. Protests were in vain. Joey was fired. I don't think we know at this point what makes a person well suited to provide high quality of care for school-age children. We need to examine the course content and job descriptions and experiences of a number of other related fields, and to spend time in thoughtful analysis before we are ready to say that George can work in our after-school program but Joey may not. This is clearly an area for urgent and immediate study.

Everybody who spoke at the conference noted the difficulties inherent in school-age day care. These difficulties are real, and I will look at them later. What struck me more, however, is the fact that school-age day care is so much more feasible financially than group infant care or even group care of three to five year olds. Admittedly, the former is not easy to set up. There is a gap between being able to get school-age day care off the ground with parent fees and success. Without more legislation at the state or federal level, school-age day care is no lead pipe cinch.

Yet over and over, I learned, it can be done. Although some subsidy in some form is needed, the amount required is often small compared to the overall program. What has to be raised and negotiated is well with-

in the range of the feasible and possible. It might be a small grant from the county, or free space in a school building. Whatever it is, it is not large and overwhelming.

Considering the communities where school-age day care is thriving (to the extent that any day care can be said to thrive) on the basis of this conference, I have an impression that places in which school-age day care gets off the ground are rich in human resources. It takes determined parents to get a decision to support school-age day care, not only because of the need for some modest subsidy, but also because of negative attitudes towards day care. Our poorest communities have not been able to create this kind of leadership in the way that our richer communities have been able to do. The people in the poorer communities have other places to put their energies. But when there is an easier way to provide school-age day care, when there are subsidies and technical assistance, these early efforts described here will provide rich experience for expanding day care. I may be wrong, but my impression is that school-age day care, as represented here, is a phenomenon of unusually resourceful communities.

Even in those communities, it seems to take some skilled pushing to overcome what seems to be a natural school resistance to "caring." Schools vary a lot, and no generalization holds. But our day care programs reported a reluctance on the part of school personnel to share space and to take on caring functions. There was an attitude of resistance, both "blatant and subtle": low priority among school board members, turf problems. That seemed to be common.

However, schools have several motives for being interested in school-age day care. With shrinking school populations, they face a corresponding reduction in school staff. The neighborhood school concept, with schools taking on other functions to justify their existence, occupancy and staff costs, added to public concern over vandalism and of unoccupied school buildings, fosters a political climate which offers support for extended day programs. At the same time negative attitudes toward day care also exist. It takes political skill to seize the environmental opportunities and ride the tide that is favorable to school-age day care, without getting caught in the cross currents of negative biases.

These negative biases are formidable. There is a massive, organized right wing attack which uses day care as a central issue. Day care, they assert, undermines family and parent rights. Part of the anti-day care movement, and it is a movement, can be described simply in one word: "crazy." The kind of argument that is made links a lot of knee-jerk issues in strange ways. For instance: "If we celebrate the International Year of the Child, then parents will have to pay their children the minimum wage for doing household chores, and children can sue their parents for making them go to church." Crazy is the only word for that. Or, "If we pass the ERA, then parents will be forced to place their children in federally sponsored day care centers." Crazy again. But I don't believe it is simply crazy people in the United States who generate the anti-day care mail which Congress receives. (You should know that no other issue, including the war in Southeast Asia, has generated the volume of mail which the day care issue generates.) Rather, it seems to me, a small but

vociferously strong right wing is playing skillfully, on possibly legitimate fears of the general public.

In reality, I think parents are frustrated with the schools; where there have been differences in social class and values between parents and the schools, the schools' values have prevailed. Parents are anxious at the possibility that the relentless march of history preordains greater influence by schools or school-like insitutitions, and lesser influence by themselves. Even if they must work and therefore need child care, they are fearful that a professional group, with a haughty disregard for parents' values, will receive government support and will in the end further erode parents' ability to pass on their values to their children.

These are very real fears, whether we agree with them or not. If they are the feelings of some parents, that is a fact, whether or not the feelings are justified. If we want to continue to improve in the area of parent/staff sharing, we need to examine the extent to which we may, in the past, have earned these anxieties, But even if we were perfect, and there were no ways we could improve our support for families and for children in the family context, we still would have parents' perceptions of us to contend with.

One of the main stumbling blocks to effective communication between educators and the community is, I believe, that a lot of the cherished buzz words in our field -- the ones that signal quality and goodness to other professionals -- may be scaring the living daylights out of the general public. "Child development" is one example. One legislator told me that upon hearing this expression he visualizes an infant with wires coming out of the brain, while a Ph.D. scientist from Harvard sends electrical currents through the wires to "stimulate" (another "buzz" word) the brain. "Intervention" is another word we use all the time. Does that mean, to a parent, that we will penetrate the autonomy of the family in order to make decisions society believes are best for the child even if the parent disagrees? These kinds of "interventions" have often appeared in the news.

Child and family rights are changing. We have an important role to play in contributing to the direction of that change. To do so, we must shape our arguments to be persuasive, not to other early childhood educators, but to the general public and to legislators. That means we must forego jargon. Jargon is a short-cut language which is very useful in communicating with others in our field. Unfortunately, the same words that light up green with our fellow professionals very probably light up red with decision-makers and the general public.

How can we persuade parents and politicans to support day care? What arguments will work? The two most important arguments deal with the economic values and the pro-family nature of day care.

In the economic sphere, the problem is that our society is built on an economic base which values short-term over long-term investments. Legislators will agree with you that your day care program will contribute to the healthy development of children you enroll. But they may also believe that the payoff from that contribution may be years in the future.

If you can also demonstrate a potential benefit this year, the same year as the appropriation, only then will they do more than sympathize -- they will act. If you can, for example, figure out some way of presenting data that your school age day care will result in less vandalism in this same year, you have a strong case.

Since day care is connected with employment, the increased earning of parents will result in increased taxes at the state and federal level. There have been several useful studies which point out that if parents using day care are permitted to pay for it on a sliding fee scale as their earnings increase, then they pay taxes which offset the cost of the partial day care subsidy, at both the federal and the state level. A Colorado study found that day care staff and parents who work because they have day care contribute substantially to the tax base of the state. These are compelling arguments to decision-makers.

The pro-family issues are a little more ambivalent, but very interesting. Many legislators, policy-makers, and intellectuals are developing the following line of reasoning. Our government interventions into family life have generally been less than successful, at best, and sometimes they have been disasters. Foster care, by and large, does not nurture and does not give a child a permanent home. Our youth services have seldom rehabilitated any youth; on the contrary, they seem to make problems worse. In cases of child abuse, our state efforts are futile; we intrude into families which would be far better off without the intrusion, and we fail to intrude when life is at stake. How can we ever know the difference?

It is beginning to be felt that our best investment of dollars would be in shoring up the family. Examining some of the worst cases of state intervention and child abuse, one asks: would this family have been any worse off if there had been no government intervention at all? Sometimes the case is so bad that nothing could be worse.

You and I might make an immediate leap to the conclusion that if this is the way policy-makers are beginning to think, then they would be receptive to services that support the family. Yet that is an idea beyond the present thinking. What policy-makers generally agree on now is that you get better return on your public investment of funds if you spend them to shore up the family rather than substituting an agency or a service in place of the family on behalf of the child.

What worries me is the fact that as this argument is discussed, it is likely that the "family" is placed, figuratively, on one side of the ledger. This is the good side. On the other side we place "government intervention" and the word "institutions." This is the bad side. On this bad side we list all the things government has done to substitute itself for the family. Over on the good side, there is just one word, "family." The family is left all alone, unsupported and without services, because of the assumption that services are institutions and are substitutive. Clearly our task for the next year is to make it clear that not all services are the family-substitutive -- that, in fact, many are or could be family-supportive.

There is one final political issue which I find especially baffling, and that is the "social victims" philosophy. I fear that the high level graduates of schools of social work may be coming out with a philosophy something like this: Equity demands that priority be given for public expenditures to the rock bottom, hard core poor. Until we have met the needs of all of them, we cannot spend public money on anybody else. Therefore, day care must only be for the very poor, to improve the quality of life for them, since they are not upwardly mobile and cannot offer their children better opportunities.

Implementing a philosophy like this leads to decisions that parents may use day care only if they start poor and stay poor. I might argue that a philosophy like that keeps people poor, since if they use day care as economic opportunity, they will cease to be poor and become ineligible for the help. The rebuttal to my argument would be that there is no worry about that, since services are for the rock bottom poor, and anybody who increased their earnings is not a true social victim. The government is making a mistake, it is helping the wrong person, if that person uses the help to improve his or her position in life. There is therefore no injustice in terminating that person's day care support, as she was not a true victim.

I find this argument very difficult to rebut. I personally reject it and believe that day care should offer economic opportunity and a ladder out of poverty to every parent who can use it that way. But I am suggesting to you that we have very difficult attitudes to face, and that we need to be finding ways to address them, not by talking to each other, but by talking to others who disagree with us.

Probably our best arguments are the economic ones. We should be gathering data to support this type of argument because it is so powerful. And we need, as others here have suggested, to be building our constituencies in favor of extended day programs because the time is right for those who plan well and have skills in leading. After all, it is only a very little inkind or cash subsidy that we need.

It seems to me, after hearing from all of our speakers and participants, that school-age day care is an issue that can be won. I am glad to know that we have a network of people interested in developing school-age day care still further. And the fact that all of you have achieved as much as you have says to me that we can extend this idea of extended day care in many directions in the near future.

Footnote

1. Who's Taking Care of the Children? Family Circle, Vol. 92, No. 3, February 20, 1979, p. 88.